

MODALITIES OF PICTORIAL APPEARING: FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

Introduction: theoretical framing of *appearing*

Although still used as signifiers in the uninterrupted chain of semiosis, images today mean increasingly little and even less seldom do they represent. The availability of digital coding led to the manner of their appearing – that is, the ontological level of pictorial cognition – being in terms of information and communication more important than the iconological and semiotic level of pictorial cognition. Following this rather technical insight, it is necessary to think anew the relationship between aesthetics and *aisthesis*. The German philosopher Martin Seel has included art, image and sensuousness into a new kind of phenomenologically based understanding of art objects that he calls the *aesthetics of appearing* [*Ästhetik des Erscheinens*].¹ Seel's concept is designed, above all, for the sake of an aesthetic analysis of systematically new phenomena of beauty that in the age of the technosphere are realised no more as signifiers of the classic European metaphysical tradition but as visual phenomena that are realised aesthetically and artistically through their own mechanisms of sensoriness. However, what seems the most important contribution of the aesthetics of appearing is precisely the omission of criteria based on historical and theoretical canons of beauty, as well as the relativisation of

1 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* [*Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, München und Wien: Carl Hansen Verlag, 2000]; translated by John Farrell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

art historical topoi. This does not mean that classical artworks have ceased to be peaks of the humanist tradition; it does mean that their appearing, like the appearing of any other object, has to be comprehended in the light of the new paradigms of *becoming*, *emergence* and *event*. Whether the object in its appearing will be constituted as aesthetic object or common-or-garden thing depends on the observer's capacities of intuition and imagination. Although Seel does not limit his research to pictorial media, the aesthetics of appearing is based on the modalities of *pictorial* appearing, but not viceversa: the modalities of pictorial appearing are not necessarily involved in any kind of aesthetic experience. Having in mind that the *aesthetical* does not have to be *pictorial*, in this article we will give the *pictorial appearing* its theoretical independence. Starting from the difference that exists between aesthetic object and any other kind of object, we will try to open the discussion about what defines the aspects of "pure" visibility on the one hand and visibility of the image on the other.

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The difference between visuality and pictoriality is comparable to the difference between simple sensuousness and aesthetic perception. Seel says of this:

"In principle, anything that can be perceived sensuously can also be perceived aesthetically. Among possible aesthetic objects, there are not only perceivable things and their constellations, but also events and their sequences – in short, all states or occurrences of which we can say that we saw, heard, felt or otherwise sensed them. Nevertheless, the concept of aesthetic object does not coincide with the general concept of an object of perception, because what is sensuously perceivable and can therefore be the occasion of aesthetic perception is not for that reason already an aesthetic object. All aesthetic objects are objects of intuition, but not all objects of intuition are aesthetic objects."²

Since this kind of stance clearly indicates Seel's polemical attitude towards the inheritance of metaphysical aesthetics, at the beginning of his analysis he also distances himself from the tradition of the analytical philosophy of art following on from Arthur Danto: although he is in agreement with the American philosopher that any object can have aesthetic qualities (that is, "it can be aesthetically perceived"), Seel thinks that this fact is due to the manner of the appearing of the concrete object in the visible world, and not to the features

2 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, pp. 21–22.

that have been ascribed to this object in some institutional or social context. Seel's theory is essentially phenomenologically determined for it is sceptical in equal measures about the philosophical and speculative source of aesthetic experience and about its conceptualisation. Accordingly, he sends aesthetic experience back from the domain of intellectual perception to the domain of sensoriness, from the activity of critical reflection to the event and phenomenality of appearing.³ This is in a sense a return to the original Kantian teaching of "disinterested pleasure": it does not mean that the aesthetic object must not have any purpose other than being the object of pure aesthetic pleasure, rather that the human mind is capable of seeing or experiencing some object – outside or beyond its practical function – as an aesthetic object as well. Duchamp did not draw attention to the neglected beauty of the urinal nor did he reveal its aesthetic dimension that had been suppressed for years, just as Cézanne's painting is not interesting because of the artist's experience of nature. We appreciate both, like most of the great artists of modernity, because of the change of paradigm of the creation of the artwork, from the individual artistic genius to public critical judgement, i.e. from work-as-object in the direction of observer-as-subject.

But, how the things stand with images in general? Does (non-art) pictorial appearing have any other similarities with the much more exclusive Seel concept of aesthetic appearing, apart from the fact that in both cases we are more interested in visual and sensory phenomena than sign and textual narration? Can pictorial experience in the time and space of the technosphere still be articulated as iconic difference? The main thesis of this article is that today it is precisely the perception of difference, or the ability to differentiate a real from a virtual experience of the image the place in which the drama of the real, to put it in Baudrillard's terms, is played out. It seems to us that in the age when traditional images are increasingly less differentiated from immersive synaesthetic experiences (which are also partly visual phenomena, but are not images alone), there is a need for an equal perceptual concentration for us to recognise either an original art object or some simple pictorial object.⁴

3 Op. cit., p. 23.

4 See my article "What is not an Image (Anymore)? Iconic Difference, Immersion and

Another German author important for our discussion, Dieter Mersch, explains that the “logic of iconic structures” is also in essence the logic of the perception of the difference between picture and frame, i.e., image and non-image, the iconic thus necessarily being something like phenomenon or occurrence, rather than text or sign.⁵ He claims that the “pictorially visible” is a differently visible than the “nonpictorial visual”, because the picture possesses a distinctive material status through which a difference is produced between on the one hand something that is visible precisely as image and, on the other hand, something that is also visible, but is a mere visual phenomenon that is not an image. Mersch says that even the totally immersive experience of IMAX cinema can be considered an image for there is still a border that frames the in-the-image from the surrounding visual.⁶ Although in this book, and in other places, I also urge that in the case of immersion there is a marginal experience of the image and although I agree with Mersch it is still a matter of a pictorial phenomenon, the question remains whether that is really because, as he says, in the cinema we see the frame of the screen and the seat in front of us and we feel the specific cinema arrangement, or whether it is actually because we know that cinematographic apparatus is involved, together with the traditional institution of the cinema, which has not changed its illusionist character since the beginning of the era of moving images? True, much more important for us than this epistemological speculation is the phenomenological insight of Mersch according to which it is the immersive experience of the image that wipes out the basis of pictorial ontology: “All technical illusionism, what can be called pictorial immersiveness, finds in it its dynamics and its futility”. What the image attempts is equivalent to a paradox: “the effacement of that which constitutes the viewing of an image, and thus the erasure of pictoriality as a medium. The logic of technological progress exists due to this telos: a medium that negates its own mediality”.⁷

Iconic Simultaneity”; *Phainomena*, no. 92/93, vol. XXIV, 2015. pp. 92–93, 2015.

5 Dieter Mersch “Pictorial Thinking: On the ‘Logic’ of Iconic Structures”; in: Žarko Paić and Krešimir Purgar (eds.) *Theorizing Images*; Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2016.

6 Dieter Mersch, *op. cit.* pp. 163–166.

7 *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

From this it follows that the observation of the modality of pictorial appearing is the fundamental precondition for both the possibility of aesthetic perception and also of the perception of the image in general as phenomena that have an interior logic different from that of reality (or continuum of reality) in which they are located as objects of perception. These modalities have to be precisely defined, for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, because they can throw a new light on the still unresolved aporias of the pictorial turn, primarily that part of it that dealt with the issue of the domination of the visual by the textual and vice versa; and secondly, because the technosphere faces pictorial mediality with completely new challenges: the question arises, that is, how to preserve a person's capacity for the artistic transcending of reality when the experiences of pictorial representation – traditional painting and cinematography in the “old fashioned” 2D technique, for example – vanish in the digital worlds of virtuality, in which transcendence is actually no longer possible? If art in the pre-digital era was the only means through which it was possible to transgress the borders of cognition/perception and comprehend reality outside the framework of mere necessity, then the virtual space of some immersive reality makes art today equally impossible and unnecessary. As Martin Seel and Dieter Mersch suggest, a new strategy of art accordingly must be identical to the new strategy of the image: the *iconic* that in his text of 1978 Gottfried Boehm could still call *image-as-difference*, in the epochal turn of the technical-scientific age has to be turned into the *image-as-appearing*.

In order to set up a plausible model of universal pictorial appearing taking into account equally changes in the mediality of images as well as Mersch's contrast of the pictorial and the visual (one of the basic features of the technosphere), it is necessary to liberate images of the surplus of content inscribed, that is, approach them as abstract entities; I do not necessarily think here of pictures of abstract art, but as pictures as objects set free of culturally inherited aesthetic content.⁸ Martin Seel in *The Aesthetics of Appearing* sets himself a

8 In the second part of *Aesthetics of Appearing* is an essay entitled “Thirteen Statements on the the picture” in which the German author expressly states that the problem of the ontology of the picture is opened up more clearly if we start off from abstract images, since they do not bear the burden of representation: “Every theory of the image has on the one hand to explain how the pictured object is linked with the pictured

harder task for not only does he attempt to split off the factual kind of appearing (constitutive for any object at all) from the concrete phenomenal appearing (which is a precondition for aesthetic differentiation), but also endeavours within the desired aesthetic norm to set up criteria for noticing those phenomena that take part *only* in the aesthetics of appearing. Unlike the approach to the aesthetic object in traditional hermeneutic disciplines, like art history for example, in which some object – painting or three-dimensional object – is ascribed artistic properties in the process of interpretation, Seel's method assumes a process of subtraction or abstraction of a multitude of the phenomenal features of some object and drawing attention to only those phenomena that are aesthetically relevant. He calls this process of aesthetic reduction of all those unlimited and never ultimately comprehensive phenomena that make up the universal facticity of some object “the simultaneous and momentary appearing of appearances”.⁹ In other words, something can occur or appear in a specific way, in some context and in a specific manner of looking, irrespective of all those universal and permanent features of that object according to which it would not actually be particularly aesthetically interesting. The *appearance* of an object is its universal factuality according to which we recognise the object within one class of visually and haptically perceptible objects. On the other hand, *appearing* is an aesthetic operation of visual focusing and sensory comprehension of the object in a new status: at once liberated of the multiplicity of its everyday appearance and also enriched with a unique “simultaneous and momentary” appearing.

In this German author, as we can see, we are faced above all with a model of understanding artistic objects, while our analysis refers primarily to the much more general concept of *iconic* difference. To this extent the modalities of pictorial appearing that I shall propose here are not entirely comparable

depiction,, and on the other how the pictured depiction is connected with representation”. In other words, the concept of representation in any event complicates what the picture itself is, for it is clear that representation is above all the relation between the presence of what is depicted in the picture and its absent referent. For this reason, when we have to do with non-figurative pictures, Seel concludes that the so-called abstract picture “is proved to be the most concrete and hence the paradigmatic picture” (see: M. Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, pp. 161–163.)

9 Seel, op. cit., pp. 46–62.

with appearing as aesthetic category described in Martin Seel, but they are also not general categories of appearance – the merely visual or visible. I shall use *Erscheinen* only partially in the Seel sense, primarily thinking here of the abstraction of the symbolic-narrative content of the image through a kind of phenomenological turn from the textual to the iconic substance of the artistic (in this case pictorial) object. I shall attempt, thus, to come closer to phenomenological models that invoke Seel's "event and moment of appearing", then Boehm's "iconic difference" as well as Mersch's "pictorially visible", and apply them taking into consideration above all the consequences of Paić's interpretation of the technosphere, an interpretation that dramatically draws attention to the completely new meaning of concepts like the real, the simulated and the virtual.¹⁰ In addition, or primarily perhaps, my intention in the sequel is to describe four basic modalities of pictorial appearing, in order in the second part of the book to consider with respect to concrete examples the possibilities of a new theory of the image outside the essentialist-subjectivist aporias.

1. Temporality: representational, simultaneous and reciprocal images

The most important change that digital technology has brought to the whole of visual culture is the totally new effect of *time* in the production and perception of images. The basic characteristic of representation, i.e. of the reproduced image, whether painting on canvas, photography or film – is that it is always a visual phenomenon that has come into being only *after* the represented event took place. The purpose of representation and the visual arts that have been based on it during the several-millennia-long history of images was

10 Among the Croatian authors, Žarko Paić has most systematically argued on the account of *technosphere* as a term that defines consequences of the technological turn in the contemporary universe of humanist thought. According to Paić, technosphere is a new time and space of the image in which new digital construction of reality does not aim at creating a sort of new utopia, or new model of representing the world, rather technosphere is now *itself* this new world. For more about this see in: Žarko Paić, *Treća zemlja. Tehnosfera i umjetnost*; Litteris, Zagreb, 2015. On the contextualisation of Paić's concept of technosphere in connection to *Bildwissenschaft* and also on his general thoughts about this specific term see in: Krešimir Purgar, "Zero Degree of Representation. Art, Technique and Pictorial Appearing"; *Ars Adriatica*, no. 6/2016.

precisely in enabling the division between the unfolding of the experience of life as temporal continuum from the experience of art as cut inside the continuum. Until the appearance of direct televisual transmissions with the help of video-links or somewhat later with the aid of satellites, every image could be *only* representation, that is, the image always followed the principle of temporal otherness or discontinuity with respect to the relentless course of time. The image halted time, although it was not its main ontological property, for the problem of pictorial anachronism has always been a priori experienced as innate to what the image is – that is, halted time that has always already occurred. Since not a single picture that was created before the twentieth century could have been simultaneous with the event it depicted, the problem of temporality is seen in relation to the characteristics of the intra-pictorial depiction and not with respect to the source reality. Irrespective of how long a period of time represented in the image was concerned, every representation was ontologically congruent with any other.

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Let us take as an example a depiction of movement in four totally distinct categories of representation that all present some kind or phase of movement but differ in terms of their media basis: Caravaggio's *Entombment* of 1603; a series of photographs of a horse galloping by Edward Muybridge of 1878 and his proto-cinematographic device called the zoopraxiscope; then the painting of Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase* of 1912, the Umberto Boccioni sculpture *Continuity of Space* of 1913 and finally the oil on canvas of Gerhard Richter *Woman Descending a Staircase* of 1965. In order to depict movement, each of these artists had to find a manner of how to condense the time necessary for movement to be distinguished from the depiction of some static scene. Photography, oil on canvas and sculpture require intervention in the content and the stylistic complex in order for the depiction to be interpreted temporally, while for the film, the media ground alone is enough: even a very static film depiction will always reveal the presence of time via hardly perceptible shifts.¹¹ A static represented picture does not possess any time proper to itself,

11 The introductory scene from Haneke's film *Caché* is a good example of the treacherous and manipulative character of filmic time. The very static first shot in Haneke's film has a double role: structural and narrative. At the structural level the static shot taken with a fixed camera announces the director's manipulation of film temporality,

but is dependent on the temporality that it shows: a classic *tableau* could capture only that very moment that we do indeed see in the picture. Since in Caravaggio's *Entombment* we do not see what immediately preceded the moment represented, or what comes just after it, the condensation of time is rendered by the dramatic gesturality of the figures that is able merely to *foreshadow* the continuity of the act of the entombment.

In Boccioni and Richter temporality is shown with the same ontological restriction of the medium (one pictorial composition and one sculptural volume) but in the stylistic innovations of these two authors it is suggested, much more directly, that the invisible time (time left out of the picture, not represented) before and after the moment represented nevertheless did exist. Richter shows this time representing the long exposure of the camera, while Boccioni achieved the same effect by combining an imagined series of temporal moments into a single united volume. Thus both of them, and Caravaggio and Duchamp as well, had to sacrifice the verisimilitude of the depiction to be able to present time within the static media. On the other hand, Muybridge, with the help of experiments with a galloping horse, showed that the new medium of moving images would not know such a restriction: film shows time by its mere nature as medium, it does not exist without the time necessary for a rapid interchange of a multitude of static images or frames.

The 1964 Andy Warhol film *Empire* shows in a drastic manner what cinematographic representation would be like without the specifically filmic condensation of film time through editing: a single continued frame that can theoretically last as long as a reel. Accordingly, cinematic time came close to or was totally identified with real time but – what is particularly important for this discussion – never ceased to be representation. What happens in the Warhol film is that, although almost identical to the real pictorial-temporal situation before the camera, it is necessarily a depiction of a time that has gone irretrievably. In the film, it is true, moments of cutting can be seen when Warhol and his cinematographer Jonas Mekas change reels. The result of this manipulation

a fundamental constructive determinant of the film. At the level of content, the static frame that extends into time adumbrates the thematic linchpin, i.e., the psychological effect of observing and being observed (Michael Haneke, *Caché*, 2005, starring Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche).

of real and film time is that this temporal continuity and total identification of the two realities is disturbed only because of the technological constraints of the film medium.¹² Or, in other words, the technological constraint of the medium drew attention to its fundamentally manipulative (and accordingly, potentially artistic) character.

The most important question is still to come: what happens with pictorial representation when the technological restrictions of the classical analogue film or painting medium give way to the iconic simultaneity of the digital age? Hidden in the answer to this question is the reason why addressing the issue of temporality – and not representation – is the primary task of image theory today. My thesis runs as follows: before the appearance of direct television transmissions and before the satellite coverage of the whole planet we could reasonably consider representation as the ontological specificity of *every* pictorial depiction. In spite of its lasting validity as philosophical and phenomenological concept, Gottfried Boehm did not think he needed to append any kind of technical or scientific legitimation to his concept of iconic difference, legitimation that today might crucially determine the difference between image and non-image, as Boehm proposes to us in his key text *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder* of 1994. The turn to the image – that is, the iconic turn – he then recognised in the turn to the pictorial particularly in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the spirit, and not in a turnabout from traditional representation toward other, new technologies of visualisation. We can find the same problem in Mitchell's *pictorial turn* of the same year, in which the turn to the image is interpreted from the position of the ideological criticism of existing visual regimes, and not from the spirit of a

12 I do not think my argument is even slightly vulnerable to Warhol's *Empire* being shown slowed down vis-à-vis the speed of the camera used during shooting. Cinematographer Jonas Mekas shot the iconic New York skyscraper with a classic film speed of 24 frames per second, and yet Warhol decided to show it at 16. The interventions included a minimum amount of editing (although editing out of sheer necessity only), since there is no film reel big enough to shoot visual material for an uninterrupted period of six and a half hours, which is how long the material shot lasts. My argument is based above all on Warhol's idea of showing real physical time as totally inappropriate to the manipulative character of film as art from. This idea, that is, could have been conveyed in an uninterrupted film of two hours, which is that a single reel permits.

technique that has irrevocably and radically changed the methods of pictorial cognition; this also explains to us why Mitchell interprets Crary's book *Techniques of the Observer* as, primarily, a collection of the technological symptoms of modern visual culture.¹³ Although in his celebrated text Mitchell does not identify technology as the main driver of the turn to the image and does not think that it can radically separate the observer from his "human nature", he does nevertheless give Crary that contemporary techniques of visualisation, like CAD, synthetic holography, flight simulators, computer animation, control of movement or multispectral sensors can contribute to the moral and political fear of the "loss of the human".¹⁴

In this place we should not go too far and talk about the loss of the human, and yet I do think it is justified to speak about the new ontology of the image. If we look at visual phenomena in the framework of the technosphere, from the position of the technological possibilities of visualisation, then we shall observe that classical representation is today just one of three equal forms of representation: the other two are *simultaneous* and *reciprocal* images, and all three categories constitute the new *temporal* dimension of the image. Why is it needful to discuss a temporal dimension, and in what way does time affect the nature of pictorial experience? It is essential to understand that here it is not a matter of the kind of time that is necessary for a specific temporal medium, like the digital or analogue film, or the still earlier zoopraxiscope or kinoscope, to be able to produce movement, but of real time which is actually now going on within the image. When we look at any film representation, irrespective of the edited sequences characteristic of the narrative film, or of a continuous, extremely long take characteristic of experimental films (like Warhol's *Empire*), we are dealing then with a precisely determined time that has always already happened. The very idea of both filmed fiction and documentary faction counts on images of a time that has passed. On the other hand, there are increasingly more cases of the media exploitation of pictorial time that is actually going on, which is simultaneous to all three: 1) the person looking, 2)

13 For more on this, see: W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago University Press, 1994, pp. 23–25.

14 Ibid.

to what is looked at, and 3) that through which it is looked at. The observer, the observed and the medium of observing share the same temporal continuum. This form of visualisation is not new and it is a bit paradoxical that at the dawn of the television age, in the 1920s, it was the live broadcast that was cheaper and easier to produce than the recording of a TV show on some kind of recording media.¹⁵ Such live images are formed as visual facts at the moment they are broadcast and without this moment they cannot actually exist.

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Such simultaneous images take on a very different character in our time when they are no longer used only by the entertainment industry and public information departments to involve us in some sporting event or convey to us the drama of natural disasters; rather iconic simultaneity is used to take the place of something much more material – physical presence. The use of drones in missile attacks from the air, the ability to surveil in real time every little piece of the planet, CCTV cameras in public spaces – all these are examples of simultaneous images. These images do not *re-present*, they *present*; they are the incarnation of time and the presentness of the event – what is *there* and what is *here* are together made present in the continuum of time and, unlike representations, without that continuum, they do not exist. A subspecies of simultaneous images consists of *reciprocal* images, which also possess all the features of simultaneity, with the important difference that the effect of being present is enabled for both observer and the observed. The availability of digital services like Skype and virtual technology like Oculus Rift will lead to reciprocal images in the near future providing totally immersive experience. In a traditional classification in which images were always representation, such visual experiences could no longer be considered images: in the new classification that I propose here, they are new, specific “space/event” phenomena in the sphere of the visible.¹⁶

15 For more on this, see Stefan Münker “Eyes in the Window: Intermedial Reconfiguration of TV in the Context of Digital Public Spheres”, published in: Žarko Paić and Krešimir Purgar (eds.) *Theorizing Images*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2016.

16 I have written more extensively on visual experience that cannot be considered an image in “What is not an image (anymore)? Iconic difference, immersion and iconic

The criterion of temporality is a direct consequence of the new technologies of the presentation and transmission of visual information and does not depend on the techniques of representation or reproduction and cannot be correlated with individual skills of picture production in the widest sense (painting, drawing, cinematographic technique). And now we come to a paradox. Although information technology has enabled immense possibilities of the creation and communication with the use of simultaneous and reciprocal images, representational images are still the main medium of art, while the new technology of visual simultaneity is used principally in the production of *non-fictional* contents. Does this mean that time that has “always already passed” still enables a more creative manipulation of fictional (artistic) contents or does it mean that the artistic imagination has not yet caught up with the cutting edge techniques of simultaneous and reciprocal visualisation? Or is it perhaps about iconic simultaneity still be experienced simply as reality, and not as art? It seems that the magical effect of the artistic contingency of the image has not faded in the slightest in the face of the omnipresent simultaneity of live streaming or the immanence of the image that is proper to simultaneity.

2. Transparency: non-transparent, transparent and immersive images

A division according to transparency tells about the semiotic and phenomenological *agency* of the pictorial surface: in other words, it tells about the kind of visual information we recognise on a piece of paper, on a canvas, a film or television screen. As we shall see a bit later, transparency is directly connected with referentiality, but in the case of transparency it is crucial *how* we see, while with referentiality, *what* we see. In principle we can say that in the traditional concept of representation, “intelligibility” is much more pronounced in the image than transparency. This axiom derives from the concept of the Renaissance picture as window onto the world and from Western culture having taken over this principle of representation as a natural form in which to convey three-dimensional reality into different media of two-dimensional representations. Since the whole of the classical tradition was founded on nature

as model of beauty and on Aristotle's principle of the imitation of nature as the objective of the poet's art, what is transparent on the painting, i.e. what we see through it, is actually the natural world and human interventions in the natural world (architecture, clothing, technical aids and so on). The more elements from nature we are able to "recognise" in some painting, the more will we say this image is real and realistic; it accordingly becomes more transparent, for "through it" we recognise what the image depicts.

The first paradox of the principle of transparency, which does not in fact at all diminish the credibility of this principle, is contained in the realistic nature of the painting necessarily leading to the domination of pictorial content over pictorial phenomenon. In other words, the more the attention of the viewer is directed to what the painting represents, the slighter the awareness of the actual phenomenon of representation will be. We might take, for example, the digital medium of moving images that can be maximally transparent or extremely non-transparent. We will experience a highly realistic depiction of a terrorist attack shot with a high resolution smart phone camera by a participant on the spot like a high technology snapshot, almost like a contemporary version of the Italian Baroque tableau, but, which is particularly important, will not recognise any artistic pretension in it. If the shot is fuzzy, dark or low-resolution, because it was shot from a distance with a CCTV, the observer's attention will be the more focused on the formal and technical failings of the image and accordingly on its phenomenological properties. The questions that the observer will then ask will impinge more on the area of pictorial experience ("am I sure of what I see?") than on the domain of pictorial content ("did things really happen that way?"). Non-transparency and partial transparency draw attention to the medium itself, because in conditions of reduced realism in the depiction the metaphorical window will have come between observer and world, hazy if a shot is unclear, and in the picture of abstract art, totally non-transparent. Following up Martin Seel and his "Thirteen statements on the picture" we can confirm that the paradox, then, consists of the pictorial experience being the more pronounced if the transparency is the smaller or, put still more simply, we shall be the more aware of the image itself and its media ground if we *do not* ask the question of what the image is presenting.

The second paradox of the principle of transparency – which, as I shall endeavour to show, perhaps more than the previous one confirms the theoretical relevance of the problem of pictorial transparency – consists in any possible attainment of the ideal of total transparency and full immersion eliminating the very possibility of pictorial experience. Since, as we mentioned a little earlier, transparency can be considered a person's naturalised system of recognition of the content of a picture, it follows that transparency will be present to the extent to which in a natural manner we manage to recognise the realistic nature of pictorial content, or as Kendall Walton would say, to the extent to which in the picture we manage to “see the world”. This author thinks that between highly transparent media, like photographs, and those a little less transparent, like hyper-realistic paintings on canvas, there is nevertheless an essential difference. According to Walton, photographs possess “a bit more” of those features of transparency that other kinds of image lack: however, the differences in the degree of transparency are not enough, he thinks, for us to make an essential cut among the different kinds of images.¹⁷ This analytically oriented American philosopher invokes phenomenological insights into the nature of pictorial experience and concepts like *difference* and *cut* that can be said to be equally popular in the new image science of the European tradition, thinking here primarily of the theoretical work of Gottfried Boehm and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Kendall Walton is of the opinion that the transparency of photography does not of itself contribute to its realism, for photography in a phenomenological sense is always split off from the continuum of the surface on which it lies and this separation is enough for each picture surface to have ontological otherness, irrespective of the degree of transparency: the flatness of a photograph, its frame, the wall on which it is hung, all these are elements that contribute to its flagrance: “photographs look like what they are: photographs”.¹⁸ This claim, of course, does not tend to support my argument, that is, the second paradox of the principle of transparency; however, Walton ascribes to the transparen-

17 Kendall Walton, “Transparent Pictures. On the Nature of Photographic Realism”; in: K. Walton, *Marvelous Images. On Values and the Arts*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

18 Op. cit., p. 83.

cy of the photograph some features that cannot possibly be ascribed to other kinds of visual representations. In his earlier and better known work *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Walton avers that the realism of mimetic representation is produced by a series of conventions, the primary being that certain depictions in some situations are considered truthful, irrespective of them being inherently fictional.¹⁹ From this it derives that recognition of reality in the image is not rationally founded, but is the product of “make-believe”, which always unfolds according to set rules. According to this theory, the transparency or mimetic nature of realistic images from art history is not the fruit of searching for the perfect representation of reality, but is to do with a series of historically changeable rules of make-believe. Although, for example, every realistically done portrait is always and only a fictional substitute for the real presence of the painted person, in the fictional world of mimetic make-believe that person is really present in the image. Walton says of this: “Fictionality has turned out to be analogous to truth in some ways; the relation between fictionality and imagining parallels that between truth and belief. Imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed, what is fictional is to be imagined”²⁰

Accordingly, no matter how transparent it might be, realistic painting belongs among the categories of imaginary world because it came into being within it, just like painterly representation. For our argument, indeed, it is more important what Kendall Walton says in his later text, which is that the transparency of the photography definitely does not belong to that category of visual experience to which some other kinds of mimetic representation belong (like painting, sculpture and so forth). Walton thinks that the degree of realism in some depiction does not depend on the degree of its mimesis, but whether the given depiction belongs to the category of imagination or the category of truth. In photography the rules of make-believe cannot be applied simply because different rules of perception prevail: in the photograph we do not imagine we see something, rather we believe that we do.²¹ Although the

19 Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*; Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 38.

20 Op. cit., p. 41.

21 Walton, “Transparent Pictures”, pp. 85–87.

basic difference between photography and painting is that the former always shows something that does indeed exist, while painting does not necessarily have to present really existing objects, much more important is that the photograph has brought us a totally new way of looking at mimetic scenes; that kind of looking that no longer has any connection with the post-Renaissance endeavour for realism in painting or with the usual theories of realistic art. For Walton the photograph is something like a “supertransparent” medium through which we really do see *that which* the photograph shows.²²

This insight is important to us because in it Walton definitely sets the problem of transparency aside from the area of representation theory and shows that these are two very different categories of visual experience, categories that depend on two incompatible theoretical premises: the phenomenology of looking in the case of transparency and the semiotics of the pictorial sign in the matter of representation. Accordingly, from Walton’s insights we might draw the conclusion that maximum transparency in the painting can lead to immersive visual experience, on condition that the technique of visualisation by which this is achieved enables pictorial truth in which it is possible to believe (and not be imagined, as in painting). The transparency of photography is just one, in truth very small, but historically verified, step in the direction of media strategies of transparency that today can be seen in the ever greater dimensions of TV screens, the huge cinema screens of IMAX, the 3D technologies, VR spectacles and so on. In the book *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, Oliver Grau showed that a kind of “poetics of transparency” has always been present in the pictorial representations of Western art and has depended on both the scopic regimes current in individual periods and on the technologies of visualisation available.

We might therefore look today at the modernist revolution of the second half of the 19th century and the abstract art that stemmed from it more as a conflict with the poetics of transparency than as a conflict with the tradition of realism. I derive this conclusion from the conviction that pictorial immersion, i.e., the merging of pictorial experience with reality is part of the historical process of the teleology of representation – the human need to produce im-

22 Ibid.

ages that will describe, replace or amend reality. The second paradox of the transparency principle, then, consists in those depictions that have managed the most to get away from the “image of reality” having in an ontological sense come closest to the “true image” – naturally, this is a matter of radically *non-transparent* paintings of abstract art.

The division of images according to transparency is aimed at the introduction of a multidisciplinary criterion capable of approaching images from the position of their attitudes to the reality of the technosphere, and not, as was the case in traditional visual disciplines, from the position of attitude to the concept or idea of reality. This is a crucial turn that above all takes into consideration that there is no longer one reality, which is capable of being perfectly simulated using some exceptional painting skill or highly precise technologies of reproduction. It is about the classical Renaissance ideal of painterly transparency not only getting into the area of technical reproducibility, as Walter Benjamin already observed in his celebrated essay, but above all today about the technological *generativity* of the digital code, i.e., of becoming picture as immaterial visual phenomenon. Abstract art, as we saw in the case of Martin Seel, looks after the material experience and opacity of the painting as iconic difference, while digital technology plunges us into areas of simulation that undoubtedly provide some kind of synaesthetic total experience of visibility – but of visibility that is *no longer* an image.

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3. Mediality: material, imaginary and virtual images

When we speak of the division of the image from a medial ground one should remark right at the beginning that this is not a division according to the traditional kinds of media carriers, like graphic prints, photographic negatives and positives, newsprint, screenings and so on; rather, it is about tangibility as categories of material and non-material appearing. Primarily I am referring here to the classical Mitchell division: into the concept of *picture* that unites material, solid or three dimensional objects in which one of the surfaces serves as vehicles of the visual information; then to the concept of *image*, which relates to non-material, purely optical visual sensations present in the human mind in the neuro-cognitive form of mental awareness or non-material picto-

rial experience; finally, I am thinking that one should add to Mitchell's division a third medial ground that is neither generated by indexation (leaving a trace) on some material support nor is a purely mental picture, but depends above all on electronic impulses – the kind of picture that Friedrich Kittler calls the “calculated image”, that is, the *digital* file of virtual image.²³

Why would I think that the theory of pictorial appearing has to be aware of this radically simplified division of the medial grounds of the image? Put in other ways, why would I think that it is more important for contemporary interdisciplinary picture theory, for example, to notice the difference in medial ground between the mechanical and the digital picture, or the mental and the hologram image on the one hand, than between the graphic print and the oil painting on the other? The first part of the answer to this question is simple: above all because the theory of pictorial appearing as conceived here deals with the ontological issues of images and not with their artistic value or social function. The mediality of the image is connected with its origin as visual phenomenon, and not with its value as signifier or with theories of identity, like semiotics, at history or gender studies. The second half of the answer is less connected with the academic disciplines mentioned and their criteria and so is more theoretically specific. In the theory of pictorial appearing, that is, as well as the other criteria that I list (temporality, transparency and referentiality), it is necessary to define more precisely the manner in which images arrive in the world, how they appear to us and what makes them possible. As we saw earlier, Martin Seel is fully aware that it is necessary to look at the problems of meaning, value and identity, however important in and of themselves they were in Western art history, not as values in relation to some aesthetic *ideal*, as is the case in traditional disciplines, rather that aesthetic value always needs re-constituting in the space that is opened up *between* appearance and appearing. Let us recall: in Seel appearance is the universal factuality of some object, while appearing is an aesthetic operation that depends on the specific momentary relation of one and the other.

23 For the calculated image see the text in Croatian of Friedrich Kittler “Pismo i broj. Povijest izračunate slike”, *Europski glasnik* no. 10/2005. Translated from German by Martina Horvat, pp. 471–484.

Pictorial appearing itself is freed of this relationship simply because we are here – as already stated – not interested in the aesthetic and value components of the image, rather the way we see it, or the way it appears to us. This problem can be more successfully analysed with the use of one more exclusive theory, that which deliberately leaves out the aesthetic component of the image – meaning the “logic of iconic structures” of Dieter Mersch. Very clearly in the footsteps of the iconic difference concept, Mersch goes much deeper than Boehm himself even into the problem area of pictorial experience and creates out of the concept of iconic difference a much more useful theoretical tool. Mersch, that is, presents iconic difference as a kind of “medial philosophy of the picture” and says that mediality of the picture cannot be derived from its structures of representation or from a symbolic or hermeneutic reading of it. Each of these dominant models obscures its specific pictorial ontology. It is necessary, above all, to devise and create awareness of models that distinguish the pictorial from the non-pictorial, and not one meaning from another meaning. Most images will create a specific problem here, for by what they show they will draw us into them and in this way divert our attention from their pure media ground. Mersch thinks that the solution of this problem is not in the image but in the gaze: only the specific logic of the gaze can make a difference between picture as *picture* and picture as *thing*: “a gaping difference exists between pictoriality and the creation of visibility, which nonetheless remains invisible”.²⁴ In other words, the image can be constituted in a kind of “cut” or “border”; this border, indeed, is not made visible by itself, but only by the gaze of the beholder, since iconic difference cannot become visible *on* or *inside* the picture. If the iconic difference, as fundamental phenomenological property of the image, is not visible then it means that the image is not visible *per se* but only as a multiple relationship of the possibility of the gaze, the temporality, transparency, mediality and referentiality of pictorial surfaces.

For the theory of pictorial appearing, and particularly for the category of mediality, this is particularly important and so we shall attend to it a little more. Mersch correctly states that the special mediality of the image cannot

24 Dieter Mersch, “Pictorial Thinking: On the ‘Logic’ of Iconic Structures”, pp. 163–166.

be reduced to a grammatical or rhetorical mode and so semiotics, hermeneutics and iconology both essentially and disciplinarily miss what should be addressed as the medial in the image. One of the most egregious examples of this is, according to Mersch, the figure of ekphrasis, which only emphasises the incommensurability of image and text, and in this way or a priori guarantees failure in the linguistic presentation of the visual or through a discursive analysis of the image turns visual mediality into the incommensurable experience of text.²⁵ However, after we have rejected ekphrasis, hermeneutics or traditional iconology, we have still not answered the question of what actually defines the mediality of the image. In my opinion it is possible to answer this question only if we understand mediality as just one of four categories that in their specific interrelationship create the whole ontology of the image or picture. As Mersch very reasonably observes, we cannot discuss mediality in the context of meaning and that is why every theory of the image should in its classification system draw attention to this. Bearing this out is the earlier mentioned claim of Martin Seel that abstract paintings are *paradigmatic* pictures because they do not represent anything. However, when this – actually otherwise acceptable – statement is made in this way, it turns out that one is the condition of the other, or, that some picture is paradigmatic precisely because it is abstract. In this place I would propose a different causality: the abstract picture is the paradigmatic picture because in the abstract picture there is the greatest cut between its medial ground on the one hand and referentiality on the other. Or as Dieter Mensch would say, because in the case of such a kind of picture the most visible is “a series of fissures” between image and gaze: in other words, in the perception of the abstract picture a whole series of “differences, aporias and chiasmas which evoke varied series of ‘perforations’ occurs, and the task of the philosophy of the pictorial that is based on the gaze has to be committed to reconstructing the mediality of the image and the specific scopophilia it evokes from this inherent system of differences”.²⁶

A special task of the theory of pictorial appearing is to differentiate the categories of appearing in a satisfactory manner, for as we have seen it is not

25 Ibid, p. 167.

26 Ibid.

enough just to distinguish the medial and the semiotic/iconological, but they have to be put into a sustainable relationship. The “pure iconic” will never exist independently of other kinds of appearing and so the theory of the image has above all to take into account the modalities of separation and the potential linking of apparently incompatible ontological categories. This separation is suggested to us primarily by phenomenology and Husserl’s concept of intentionality, but also by Mitchell’s division into visible and invisible pictures/images, to which we must certainly add a whole string of theoreticians of the technosphere, including Benjamin, Kittler, Bolter, Grusin, Manovich, Masumi and Paić. The digital or the virtual image is the third media ground that in a theoretical sense is still largely a *tabula rasa* in image theory.

4. Referentiality: non-referential/self-referential, referential, inter-referential, multi-referential and meta-referential images

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The fourth basic term in pictorial appearing is *referentiality*. This concept is similar to the terminological set used by traditional visual history and visual theory disciplines such as art history, iconography, hermeneutics and semiotics. In addition, referentiality is still people’s most direct way of being in contact with picture, or at least a way that in everyday communication each one of us is most aware. While temporality, transparency and mediality are primarily concepts useful for aims of the reflexive activity of theory, i.e., while the role of these concepts can in its entirety be understood as a kind of splitting of theory off from the content of the image, the concept of *referentiality* in this division lets us encompass the image as *instrumental* medium with pronounced functions of communication, discourse and narrative. The reasons for the theoretical consideration of the diverse functions of images in this context need explaining at once. Of all the arguments given to date it should become clear that inside the theory of pictorial appearing, the instrumentality of the image is not foregrounded, before the problem of function would necessarily take us back again to the essentialist and subjectivist features of images (that is, to “great humanist theories” and politics of identity respectively). However, the instrumentality of images cannot be dismissed in an ontological analysis like ours because the ultimate object of this theory is to show that the instru-

mentality of images, or their “lives” as objects of communication, is actually the consequence of three modalities of appearing that precede the referential functions of pictorial communication, i.e., which essentially determine how images will be looked at and understood.

It is possible to set up various categories of referentiality only if we also have in mind the classical Aristotelian tradition of imitation of nature as source of sensory pleasure as well as (the now equally classical) semiotic tradition. This latter covers, among other things, de Saussure’s concept of sign and referent, Barthes’ interpretation of denotation, connotation and mythologisation, then the semiosphere of Yuri Lotman and the concepts that have been derived from it like Eco’s interpretation of semiosis that later developed into Eco’s particular criticism of semiotic inscription of meaning into the work – overinterpretation [sovrainterpretazione]. However, the great semiotic tradition is not there for us to set up within what is primarily a phenomenological theory of pictorial appearing some counter-method of sign and meaning, rather it is necessary to us simply because signifying (or the deliberate absence of it) is the everyday practice of visual communications. Both these arguments are a reason why our ontology of pictorial appearing cannot deal with the issues of *what* is represented, or *why*, but of *how* this is done and what the effects of referentiality are for the concept of pictorial appearing itself are. The semiotic construction of the sign and the enchainment of meanings (which we can call semiosis or mythologisation, depending on the source) is a suitable model for the understanding of referential appearing because it shares with it the idea according to which one visual utterance is always related to a second utterance, that is the next utterance is created as a function of the predecessor or in reference to its predecessor. If we set off from referentiality as the degree zero of pictorial meaning, then each subsequent category of referentiality is established in some relation to this degree zero, which we can call the *original meaning*. Every other, every derived image that refers to the original image in some way contains its predecessor, i.e., refers to it. The only exception to this rule lies in non-referential or self-referential images, but this will be discussed below.

If we get away from de Saussure’s concept of the signifier, signified and sign and think of the sign not as an arbitrary but as a *motivated* point of referentiality (as proposed by Barthes’ mythology and Eco’s semiosis), then the iconic

sign can be anything that in a sufficient measure recalls or refers to some extra-pictorial reality: photographs, printed matter, pictures on the screen, in a word, pictures of very diverse genres and media grounds. In the modality of pictorial referentiality the smallest unit of meaning is that within which we recognise some completed relation or reference to reality, and this relation in practice is most often set up with individual (artistic) images, film sequences or a photographic snapshot. These are referential images, and from them the chain of semiosis (or the mythologisation of meaning) starts off; these images then get into more complex relations, commenting on and invoking the initial pictorial reference. We can best understand this if we make use of the example of some actual pictures and compare and contrast them to other pictures that might stem from or be derived from them. A photograph of Joe Rosenthal shot in 1945 on Iwo Jima became an iconic sign of the victory of the American army in the war in the Pacific. During the years it became much more than its instrumental function tells us, i.e., it became much more than a pictorial reference to the event it shows – the placing of the American flag. However, the original or “zero” meaning in the semiotic chain has to be reduced to mere referentiality, for no other meaning could have arisen if this first photographic snapshot, which meant at the moment it was taken only what it shows, had not been recorded.

On the other hand, an advertising photograph created in 1990 for HIS Jeans does not just show a boy and a girl lifting the American flag, but very obviously gets into a dialogue with the mythic meaning of Rosenthal’s photograph taken a few decades earlier. The ad photograph is, undoubtedly, referential, but it is also, and much more so, *inter-referential*, for it takes much more of its meaning from the mythic position of Rosenthal’s photograph than from its own referentiality, which is based on a mimetic depiction of four youngsters raising the American flag. Its own referentiality, then, is there only for it to take up the thread from some other, previous meaning. At this moment, the motif of raising the American flag, has already got into a *multi-referential* field in which the original (Rosenthal) sign of heroism and the ironical advertisement heroism open up a space in which each subsequent reference to the original or the ironical picture are interwoven and get “out of control”. An example of the multi-referential image is the photograph of Thomas Franklin taken on

September 11, 2001, on the ruins of the New York Twins, showing three firemen putting up the American flag in the manner of the American soldiers on Iwo Jima, but also in the manner of the carefree youngsters in the jeans ad. To which of these two photographs does Franklin's snapshot of the firemen refer? The original sign of heroism or the ironical persiflage intending to call into question the myth of American invincibility? Although Franklin's was probably triggered by inter-reference to Rosenthal's iconic work, a photograph in the open sphere of culture necessarily refers to both predecessors, for its meaning cannot avoid semiotic chaining in any direction whatsoever. And so this is a multi-referential picture. Multi-referentiality is a much more complex form of pictorial interrelations for it not only includes invocation of a vast mass of iconographic sources, but also because in this process it is not possible to exclude the action of quite often opposed ideological discourses, which also make up part of the referential scope of the image.

Meta-referential images are what W.J.T. Mitchell calls metapictures: pictures that refer to themselves, that is, to several levels of their own ontological position: 1) they reveal the way in which they are made or to the mechanism of the production of pictorial meaning in general; 2) they depict a kind of "theory of images" without getting outside their own pictorial medium, i.e., raise the question of whether it is possible to speak about images without ekphrasis, without language as verbal substitute; 3) they reveal the essential pictorial nature: the image, that is, to be able to function at all as medium of communication, cannot be equated with reality, but not with itself either.²⁷ Mitchell's concept of metapicture (or pictorial meta-referentiality in our case) raises in principle the question of whether images can discuss themselves, instead of the traditional disciplines of iconology and semiotics doing it for them. When pictures are directed toward themselves and when they reveal the models of production of all other images, they become subversive mechanisms that uncover institutions and the discursive production of power. One of the best known examples of such a kind of painting is Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which, with a complex system of inter-, multi- and meta-referentiality tests out

27 For more detail about this see Mitchell's text "Metapictures" published in W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

the status of the iconic in general as mechanism of the political production of power.

It is interesting that Mitchell should say that metapictures are at the same time radically self-directed, i.e. they create their own inter-pictorial theory of the image, but they are also intertextual, that is, they create meaning by being enchaind with other pictorial utterances that co-exist in parallel within the visual culture of some community or historical period. If we take into consideration Mitchell's reasoning and his concept of referentiality that I am endeavouring to defend here, it follows that metapictures, or meta-referential pictures, go back to the very beginning of pictorial referentiality, i.e. to *self-referentiality*, or radical orientation of the images to itself. Paradoxically, images that are most oriented to themselves, as we saw above in the case of Martin Seel, are those that refer to nothing except themselves, that is, pictures of abstract art. I think that we might approach this paradox in the following way:

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non-referential, or self-referential images on the one hand and metareferential on the other only confirm in different ways the same basic pictorial ontology that Boehm calls iconic difference. Both kinds of images ultimately reveal their position of otherness as compared to extra-pictorial reality: the first does this by emphasising the differences between image and world, and the other by radical deconstruction of the way in which it is culturally produced.

Every picture that appears in some referential modality – irrespective of whether it relates to something outside itself (referentiality) or is related only to itself (non-referentiality and self-referentiality) can in principle possess only the two earlier mentioned temporal modalities – representationality and simultaneity. In a pictorial-ontological sense it is irrelevant whether we look at a direct transmission (iconic simultaneity) of a picture that represents something or reminds us of something (referential, then) or whether we look at non-referential, i.e. abstract, images (for example, when in a live broadcast of the opening of an exhibition we look close up at some abstract picture). This latter picture would be simultaneous and non-referential. However, we cannot term pictorial experience the rather improbable, if possible, situation in which in front of two computer screens with web cameras turned on there are two non-referential pictures “looking” at each other. This hypothetical situation confirms that the effect of referentiality is independent of the effect of temporality, but

only if the condition that Husserl calls “pictorial consciousness” is satisfied. In other words, an image, in order to appear at all, irrespective of the degree of its own referentiality, has to be “produced” by the gaze. The need for pictorial consciousness to exist tells us that this fundamental phenomenological insight sets up a border behind which perception of the image is no longer possible.

On the other hand, although we have seen that an image does not exist without the intentional consciousness (of the observer) that produces it, Sartre says that these two – perception and the image – are not one and the same. From this it derives that what makes the *act* of perception inseparable from the *object* of perception is just the product of consciousness that agrees to the cognitive convention that Sartre calls “the illusion of immanence”.²⁷ The illusion of immanence is necessary in a communication system in which consciousness operates at a level different from that of physical objects, even when these objects are in a certain way incorporated into consciousness and constitute a continuum with it. The illusion of immanence enables the continuum not to be revealed, enables the images to be received *as if* they were what they show, although they are not what they show, but are simply images.²⁸ The modalities of pictorial appearing open up the possibility of a kind of “transitional” theory of images for contemporary times that are not (only) analog any more while not being (only) digital either. This theory takes into account the vast space that still exists between objects and perception, that is, between *eikon* and pure sensuousness.

28 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary. A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, Routledge, London 2004. [1940], p. 12; then John Lechte, “Some Fallacies and Truths Concerning the Image in Old and New Media”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2011, pp. 357–358; and in Krešimir Purgar, “What is not an image (any more)?”, op. cit., pp. 166–167.

29 Jean-Paul Sartre, op. cit., p. 6.